

### **United States (U.S.) Social Security Administration (SSA) Use of Focus Groups**

#### **General**

The U.S. SSA is using focus groups as one of several means of obtaining views on satisfaction from beneficiaries and members of the general public. This technique is one way to obtain opinions on service delivery quickly and cost-effectively although it has some limitations, as discussed below.

In the past year, focus groups have been conducted or are being planned, to discuss issues involving Social Security's major programs -- retirement, survivors, disability and assistance programs. Focus groups were also used for related topics, such as the quality of correspondence mailed to beneficiaries, service delivery to non-English speaking groups and methods of check payment.

Focus groups are useful for a variety of reasons:

- Focus groups are a cost- and time-effective way to generate qualitative data.
- They provide a setting for beneficiaries and members of the public who may have varying educational backgrounds and literacy levels to share and discuss their points of view.
- Observers (who may also be actual decisionmakers) are able to hear original reactions from participants (i.e., they make the abstract real).
- Focus groups have a synergistic effect: a statement by one person can trigger other participants to share their ideas and information.
- Videotapes and transcripts can be made of individual sessions, thus making future review possible, especially for those unable to directly observe the groups.

However, this technique also has its disadvantages. Among them are the following:

- Focus group members select themselves by agreeing to participate. Therefore, they may be very different from the general population; for example, greater risk-takers.
- Dominant group members tend to take over the lead of focus group discussions, producing a "group think" effect.
- Some participants may be unwilling to share information in a group setting because they may feel it is too private, embarrassing or unimportant.

- Discussions tend to focus on negative issues or complaints, rather than praise.
- Although lists of potential participants can be drawn from a random sample of beneficiaries, there is no guarantee that any selection method will yield a group of participants that truly represents the population.

### **Methodology**

In a focus group, a small number of individuals (about 8 to 12) are brought together to discuss a topic, which the focus group sponsor selects. The discussion is directed by a trained moderator who follows an outline of issues, but also encourages participants to voice their own opinions. Since the task of being a moderator requires complex interpersonal and communication skills, it is essential to use trained moderators.

The sessions usually last no longer than 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Ideally, the site for a focus group should be a research facility with specially-equipped rooms featuring two-way mirrors (for observers) and audiovisual recording equipment (for videotaping). However, other possibilities include an agency office, the office of a research company or a hotel meeting room.

Experts recommend that two or three focus groups be utilized per customer segment. If all of a company's customers are homogeneous, only two or three focus groups are necessary.

For an examination of service delivery, SSA held 12 focus group sessions to include all the beneficiary and general public segments that were involved. The aim in selecting participants for these focus group sessions was to include a cross-section of current SSA beneficiaries and the general public based on type of benefit, recent contact with SSA, geographic location, age, sex, race and income. A contract was engaged with a consultant to handle the logistical requirements, such as locating the facilities, recruiting participants and videotaping each session. SSA provided the contractor with listings of current beneficiaries for use in recruitment, as well as a screening guide to aid in recruiting participants from the general public.

A moderator's discussion guide was prepared with open-ended questions and/or statements. This was done to encourage as much discussion as possible and to avoid leading questions or questions likely to generate overly short or unclear responses.

## **Findings**

The focus group discussion provided an excellent vehicle for identifying and collecting information on the attributes that customers believe are most important to their satisfaction. The focus groups gave insight into customers' expectations, perceptions of the service they receive and suggestions for improvement.

These initial focus group sessions were successful in pointing out what SSA was doing right, what people expected and areas for improvement. Following are some of the observations that these discussions produced:

- SSA's methods of delivering service are appropriate. Participants prefer to have a variety of ways of obtaining service and a choice in determining how they interact with SSA.
- New methods of contacting SSA for service were suggested.
- Confidence in the Social Security program is low and participants' knowledge about the benefits provided is limited. There are differences in levels of confidence and knowledge depending on age.
- The quality of SSA's service is good. However, the service provided by nonurban versus urban offices is uneven. Urban offices have long waiting times and personnel are less courteous.
- Telephone service overall is good. However, there are problems involving busy signals and long periods on hold.
- To improve SSA's service, it was suggested that a caseworker approach should be considered. This would save time by having the same employee deal with an individual in all matters.
- There was an acknowledgement that optimal service may be too costly and that there has to be a balance between "wants" and costs.
- In general, requirements and procedures involved in obtaining benefits are not well understood and are believed to be too complex. This was especially apparent in discussions about disability benefits.

In summary, focus groups provide qualitative information, which is useful in the early stages of developing customer satisfaction measures. SSA decided to use focus groups in order to obtain insight into customer satisfaction and service delivery quickly. Later, selected issues became the subjects of quantitative studies (i.e., surveys).